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ABSTRACT

The speaker presents his philosophy for operating a school and some suggestions for working with teachers, students, and parents to create a humanized school. Among the suggestions are holding block coffees with parents, having monthly "truth sessions" with the P.T.A. board, inviting parents to visit the school at any time, publicizing teacher achievements, involving faculty committees in studying the teacher evaluation process, using student feedback committees, and encouraging peer tutoring. (Author/IRT)

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LARGE SCHOOLS: CAN THEY BE HUMANIZED THROUGH STUDENT STAFF RELATIONSHIPS?

Kimball L. Howes

(N.A.S.S.P. Convention - Dallas, Texas - February 6, 1973)

My presentation will start with some thoughts on philosophy, continue with suggestions on working with teachers, students, and parents, and conclude with some comments on the role of the principal as the climate leader in his or her school.

Those of us who have had large school experience understand only too well how many times we are called upon to make decisions on an hourly basis. The principal who believes in a humane school will often and inevitably find himself on the horns of a delimma, attempting to ameliorate the conflicting desires of the organization for regimentation, the student body for freedom, and the demands of his own heart. The only way I have ever been able to attain any consistency in decisions made over a long period of time is to continually refer to my value system, my philosophy, as a compass by which to steer. Here then is my credo:

I believe in theory X versus theory Y, that I'm O.K. and you're O.K., that people are essentially good rather than evil;

I believe in the Golden Rule:

I believe, and experience has taught me thus, that approximately 92-95% of our students will make the "right" decision voluntarily, if given the chance, 92-95% of the time. Therefore, why not run our schools our of respect for that positive 92-95% rather than out of fear of the 5-8% of malcontents;

I believe that criticism of the principal, especially in the large school, is inevitable no matter what he does or doesn't do. Since that seems to be the case, why not do what you believe in your heart is right, since you're going to get criticized anyway.

I believe that all principals must learn to act but not react when crisis interferes with normality. Think on what this means as, among other things, it suggests the virtue of thought before action;

I believe that principals must not be afraid to take risks. If this viewpoint is accepted, a tenure of four to six years at best on one job becomes par for the course. There was a time when a principal could stay twenty years on one job. This time is over, now, other than for rare exceptions. As Admiral Dewey once said, "Damn the torpedoes - full speed ahead!!!";

I believe, finally, that schools should be run on the philosophy of administrative inconvenience - for the benefit of the students - and not out of fear of bureaucratic faculties nor for the deification of rules and procedures.

The following comments on working with different groups of people are drawn primarly from my experiences over a four-year period in a large Ohio high school, i.e., 3,800 pupils and 205 faculty members.

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If you are making a change of any significance, especially in a direction away from the traditional pattern the community has become accustomed to, the parents had better be informed ahead of time. We embraced the concept of block coffee klotches, and I went to some 60 - 65 in a four month period. Scheduled by a special P.T.A. committee, these were held in the morning, afternoon, or evening. This committee not only arranged for the meeting places, but also saw to the availability of deserts, the delivery of invitations, and even arrangements for baby sitters when necessary. Whenever possible, I took a student with me, one who looked good and could think on her/his feet. The rules of the game were that, barring the personalizing of complaints (no individual names), anything went. Questions were asked regarding dope, discipline, long hair, all aspects of curriculum, what was wrong with youth, why couldn't the school get dedicated teachers any more, why the football team went 0-10 in one gruesome season, etc. In my opinion, the fact that we went to the people and asked for their concerns was a strong political and personal force for good.

Other actions taken with parents included:

a. Having monthly "truth sessions" with the P.T.A. board after the routine reports were over. Again, anything went and I especially encouraged them to discuss all rumors. (As a result of this, we established a rumor phone number and publicized it to the public as a means by which their questions - no matter how wild - could be privately answered);

b. We actually took forty P.T.A. board members through a five day immersion in total school living. Since we had moved from a somewhat regimented high school to a more open position, it seemed wise to let our best supporters really see for themselves what was going on. We rotated these ladies through actual experiences in the attendance office, the clinic, the library, the cafeterias, study halls, classrooms, and administrative meetings. Nothing was held back! As a result of this, we had forty missionaries who went out and did battle for the cause. They had seen for themselves that discipline was alive and well, and yet understood what the school was trying to achieve through liberalization;

c. We had the P.T.A. board members identify our most vociferous critics, and I personally called on them at their houses, inviting them to come to school and see if things were really as bad as they thought. Approximately 20 individuals actually did this, the P.T.A. providing transportation and baby sitting where necessary. I do know that most of this group came to realize that 92% of the students were pretty decent people, long hair or not;

d. Finally, we literally almost harangued our parents about feeling free to drop in at school anytime. We wanted them to see what was going on, and sincerely welcomed them when they did accept our invitation.

When working with teachers, I frequently find myself reflecting on a scene from the musical, "1776". Those of you who have seen the play will remember the climax, where John Adams asked the question: "Is anyone there, does anybody care?" This plea is one I have heard silently articulated over

by many sincere, hard-working teachers who really have wondered if anybody has noticed them, if they count for anything at all. We, as principals, tend to become cynical over the years about teachers after seeing union opportunism on the part of some and malingering on the part of others - of indifference to students and the hiding behind policy as an excuse for inactivity. We must not, however, lose faith in the many good teachers. It is incumbent upon principals, then, if they want teachers to be more humane with students, to practice what they preach in dealing with the faculty. Here are some steps that experience has proven to be beneficial:

a. Go to the concept of the "all day faculty meeting", and have teachers come to an informally arranged location during their free periods. Have coffee and doughnuts available, financing this out of internal funds. My experience has been that you will average about 13% of the faculty during each period of the day. All coaches, driver education teachers, and special teachers can be present under this philosophy, as everybody has conference periods in their schedule. This also means that people can be heard and can participate, instead of being frustrated by being one of many swallowed up in a passive audience;

b. Set up a grapevine system, preferably using secretaries as funnels, through which any information about the family life of teachers can be gathered. This will enable you to drop hand written notes or make personal visits with regard to anniveraries, births, illness, weddings, etc. Any individual, including principals as well as teachers, likes to see evidence that someone cares;

c. Always publicize teacher achievements! Whenever possible utilize local or school newspapers, otherwise using staff bulletins or announcements at faculty meetings to share the good news. Whenever possible, present teachers to the general public as creative professionals. Many men teachers, in particular, covet the opportunity of appearing in public as professionally competent. Use them in P.T.A. meetings, curricular presentations to the Board of Education, as speakers at service clubs or area administrators groups, and certainly in faculty meetings;

d. Faculty members must be encouraged to give input as to the direction they would like to see the schools go. They must be involved in decision making!! Principals must facilitate this collegial attitude while there is still time to act as friendly helpers. Read the N.E.A. Journal or your state teachers magazine and see the clear direction that these unions are taking in regard to decision making and the teachers. Either we act voluntarily now, and consequently exercise positive creative leadership, or accept the fact that within five years the unions will do it without us;

e. The Principal's Advisory Group, the Principal's Curriculum Committee, or individual Department meetings are vehicles whereby input can be fed in and talked over. When it becomes necessary to appoint a new department chairman, the wise principal will ascertain and consider the Department's recommendation.

My experience along these lines has been that department choices have coincided with my conclusions about nine times out of ten, for they, too, wanted the best person available;

f. Involve faculty committees in studying the teacher evaluation process. Let them recommend what they would like as rules for the game. My experience has been that they want standards, and are as tough on themselves as we would be;

g. In organizing teacher committees to study curricular and/or organizational change or reform, you will get a far greater expenditure of energy by guaranteeing that a large percentage of their recommendations will be accepted. To buttress and emphasize this position of faith and trust, the Superintendent, at my request, stood up in a faculty meeting and flatly stated that the administration would accept sight unseen a minimum of 85% of their findings. I used this technique with two different and sophisticated faculties in two different states. Now the interesting fact about these guarantees was that, in both instances, 100% of the recommendations was accepted. This has convinced me that such an approach acts as a tremendous catalyst for teachers, my experience being that teachers worked evenings and during weekends to come up with logical recommendations;

h. Most teachers on large faculties covet the opportunity to sit down in a small group with the superintendent and thus get to know him better. In a high school with 205 faculty members, I arranged on a regular weekly basis for groups of eight to lunch with him in a private dining room during the school day. This did wonders for all concerned and many told me later how much they appreciated it. Needless to say, I found it mutually rewarding to arrange similar lunches for myself as principal with faculty members.

One of the great joys of being a principal lies in the fact that we can enjoy daily contact with our students. The prudent principal, it seems to me, will take many steps to insure that student opinions can be fed in by a variety of means and then acted upon. Here are some ways of getting involvement from and with students:

a. Utilize student feedback committees. Set up specific times (usually after school) when any student can come and critique his courses. The key to this, of course, lies in having an administrator in charge whom the faculty trusts. With this approach, all student comments are considered "off the record". We used as the moderator the assistant principal in charge of instruction, who had been a former teacher in the school. He had the tact and ability to be able to go to teachers after these sessions and relate suggestions for consideration in a non-critical way;

b. Have reasonable rules that guarantee good taste with regard to student publications, and then turn them loose. Our newspaper was told not to mention teachers by name (other than with praise), not to use four letter words and not to criticize the Board and/or Superintendent. Rules of the school and the principal (as the figurehead) were considered fair game. This newspaper was so vivid that underground newspapers never had a chance to survive. I might add that many of the critical editorials had reasonable suggestions for solving school problems which we followed;

c. I believe that students should be allowed to change schedules any time they wish during the first six weeks in a semester provided their parents give approval, class balance can be maintained, and a reasonable reason for the request is given. Student dislike of teachers was considered valid if other sections were available;

d. One excellent way of getting student involvement is to encourage and facilitate tutoring of students by other students. This effort can cut across all levels of achievement, utilizing good as well as indifferent students. National Honor Students can be made available in study halls or before school to those pupils needing help. The so-called poor students can do suprisingly superb things with elementary pupils who are having problems in the lower grades. We had great results with this concept, using O.W.A. pupils at two elementary schools. These high school students only too well understood the frustration of being "losers" and demonstrated great compassion as well as patience in working one-on-one with pupils needing help in drill or simple concepts. One can also encourage students to adopt a grandparent, and suggest that clubs sponsor a child through CARE, sponsor a school overseas, etc. We need to appeal to the sense of nobility inherent in youth;

e. We adopted the concept of "meet the Press" assemblies. These were open assemblies where the school newspaper editor asked questions of the principal, followed by questions from the audience. The only restrictions were that no teacher be mentioned by name, other than in a positive manner;

f. I would like to mention here concepts taught me by other principals, concepts which helped me to create a more humane environment in the school:

1. When Joe Lakey was a New York principal, he met at least twice a month with groups of 10-15 D-F students. These were rap sessions long before the phrase became fashionable. Joe listened while these "rackies" talked, and told me later that several problems were nipped in the bud through this medium;

2. Jack Moore, an Ohio Principal, created what he called "Moore's Marauders". This group consisted of the toughtest boys in his school. Jack printed membership cards, drafted the boys as members, put their picture in the yearbook per se, and gave them responsibilities for curbing vandalism and theft. These students responded to the challenge, by the way, in a very positive way. Not all of us have the personality of a Jack Moore and not all of us can accordingly pull this concept off, but it can work under certain conditions;

3. Charley Baltimore, a vocational school principal in Washington, D.C., preached the philosophy that one could get more from love than from fear. Do not confuse this with permissiveness, as his school had discipline coming out of its ears. Yet these boys knew that the principal had love and affection for them in his heart. Charley both preached and practiced the Golden Rule;

4. Henry Weyland, a Connecticut principal, planned his day so

that he was in the cafeteria during all lunch periods. His belief in doing this was that the student body was his constituency, and that he should be therefore available to them under informal conditions. I got the idea of scheduling guidance counsellors into lunch period cafeteria duty from Henry, as this enabled them to be seen by students under relaxed conditions;

g. A principal can periodically call meetings after school in which students are notified that discipline problems can be discussed. This can be a useful safety valve, and can result in reasonable insights being developed from both sides;

h. The principal must confront the possibility of an alternate form of education in the large high school. At Lakewood, we identified sixty students who had been "turned off" by the school environment. Divided into two groups of thirty, these students spent one-fourth of their time in special classes where they wrote their own curriculum, had 50% say in their own grades, and were allowed to opt back into the regular curriculum when they wished to. If you go to this type of a concept, accept the inexorable fact that faculty traditionalists will be shocked by it, and that many lamentations about "lack of standards" will be voiced. My experience with this concept was that about 60% of the students were directly helped in ways not possible under traditional conditions;

i. Have an understanding with the student body that individuals can be excused from regular classes for a day when they are emotionally desperate. The only restriction here would be that students would have to remain on school property. My experience with this safety valve option over a three year period was that it was rarely used. Many students, however, told me that they appreciated knowing the option was available;

j. In cooperating with the Student Council, define the areas of responsibility, and then let Council make its own decisions within the perimeters established;

k. In dealing with smoking problems, I must go against the stated position of the N.A.S.S.P. and recommend that an outdoor smoking area be provided for those students who bring notes of permission from their parents. My experience has taught me that a designated smoking area is far preferable to smoke-filled girl's restrooms! We are either hypocrites or blind if we pretend that a no-smoking rule can be justly enforced. I came to this conclusion after suspending 350 students in one year for smoking;

l. Teachers should be constantly urged to commit themselves to a faculty-wide position that every student in the school should have at least one success experience a day. This certainly is not asking for the moon and, if carried out, will make a noticeable difference in the lives of the students in the school;

m. Finally, I urge you to investigate the feasibility of opening your cafeteria in the morning to the students for coffee, fruit, and doughnuts.

A snack bar open throughout the day can be a great morale booster to hungry adolescents. Adults have coffee breaks; why not students a snack break?

I should like to close my presentation by calling to your attention the outstanding work being done by a small foundation, CFK., Ltd., founded by Chuck Kettering. This foundation is committed to improving the work of the public schools. One of its projects is called The Principal As The School Climate Leader. Many specific items dealing with this topic are discussed in a 12 page paper, which can be obtained free of charge by writing to:

Dr. Edward Brainard, President
C.F.K., Ltd., Suite 830
3333 South Bannock Street
Englewood, Colorado 80110

I urge you to write for this publication, as its stated goals are directly in harmony with the position taken in this presentation.